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ABSTRACT

The second of five booklets designed to change the attitudes of the general public toward disabled people examines attitudes toward deaf and hearing impaired people. Six myths (including that deaf persons cannot appreciate the arts) are contradicted, and five situations demonstrating attitudinal barriers are described. Suggested actions when meeting a deaf person and for general advocacy are listed. (CL)

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Beyond The Sound Barrier

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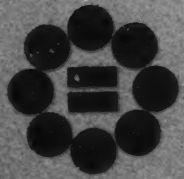

Regional Rehabilitation Research Institute
on Attitudinal, Legal and Leisure Barriers
1828 L St., N.W.
Suite 704
Washington, D.C. 20036

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

PREFACE

This booklet is the second in a series addressing attitudinal barriers facing disabled citizens. The first booklet, *The Invisible Battle: Attitudes Toward Disability*, discusses attitudinal barriers encountered by the disabled community in general. Future booklets will focus on specific disability groups.

The series of booklets, entitled *Barrier Awareness*, is being prepared with the support of DHEW/RSA Grant #15-P-57882/3-03 and The George Washington University School of Education and Human Development. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of these institutions.

Members of the staff of the Regional Rehabilitation Research Institute on Attitudinal, Legal and Leisure Barriers who have contributed to this publication include: Sharon Mistler, Debra Cornelius, Susan Daniels, and Sophia Panieczko.

—April 1978

INTRODUCTION

During the past few years, a lot of attention has been focused on the rights of disabled people. Through legislation and efforts of many consumer groups, persons with disabilities are finally becoming recognized as valuable and equal members of society. One population which has not been as visible as many other disability groups is the deaf community. Although changes have been made (e.g., the development of captioned television news and commercials in sign language), these efforts have not always been explained to the general public. The elimination of many "sound barriers" for deaf citizens has been a major step forward in improving the quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

But what of the invisible barriers that still stand in the way of disabled citizens? Stereotyping and/or negative attitudes are still held by many individuals. These attitudes often obstruct independent, dignified life-styles for disabled citizens. The attitudes may arise from fear or simple lack of knowledge about disability. Most importantly, these attitudinal barriers often go unrecognized, contributing to poor communication between disabled and nondisabled citizens.

This booklet will deal primarily with attitudinal barriers facing deaf and hearing-impaired individuals: what the major barriers are, how to recognize them, and what you can do about them. We hope it will be helpful in breaking down the invisible barriers encountered by deaf persons who live in a predominantly hearing world.

THE DEAF COMMUNITY

THE POPULATION

There are approximately 1,700,000 deaf individuals living in the United States. Another 15,000,000 Americans have partial hearing impairments, ranging from mild to profound hearing loss. Most people will either have some hearing loss in their lifetime or will have a close family member experience a hearing loss. The process of aging, alone, is responsible for a good deal of hearing impairment. Many people will not even realize the extent of the loss or its effects and therefore will not seek appropriate advice. Most people with hearing loss will face attitudinal barriers. Only the severity will differ.

This booklet is written about those persons with severe hearing loss who are having problems achieving their full potential because of attitudinal barriers.

COMMUNICATION

The major handicap facing a person with a hearing impairment is one of communication. Unable to benefit from voice communication, deaf persons rely upon their eyes for signals which represent ideas. The most commonly recognized method of communication is lip reading. The deaf person can, with enough training and concentration, understand many spoken words by watching the lips and face of the speaker.

Another form of communication is done with the hands (manual). Here, thoughts are expressed by a combination of hand movements and positions. Manual communication (sign language) has many forms. Sign language dialects exist regionally within the U.S., and different spoken languages have different sign languages (Spoken French, Sign French). Where no sign exists for a thought, the word can be spelled using the manual alphabet. Each letter is formed by the hand (fingerspelling).

Deaf citizens also communicate with written language when lip reading and manual communication cannot be used effectively. Technology presently exists which allows standard telephones to be used with small "typewriter-like" instruments (called TTY's) that transmit printed words onto a panel. Both telephone users must have this instrument in order to use the system.

When a hearing and deaf person begin to communicate, sometimes they use pad and pen to understand each other. Because many deaf people speak, sometimes only the hearing person writes his/her thoughts.

Whichever form of communication is used—lip reading, manual communication (sign language and fingerspelling) or written language—deaf citizens can express themselves and be understood by hearing citizens when both are willing to try. Communication is the important thing.

WHAT ARE ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS?

Prejudice	Discrimination
Ignorance	Dislike
Fear	Invisibility
Insensitivity	Insecurity
Bigotry	Discomfort
Stereotyping	Condescension
Misconception	Intolerance

The above words have all been used in association with or in definitions of attitudinal barriers. For this booklet, "attitudinal barriers" has been defined as "a way of thinking or feeling resulting in behavior that limits the potential of disabled people to be independent individuals."

MYTH:

All deaf persons lack the ability to speak.

FACT:

Many deaf persons speak, have normal physical vocal ability, and learn to use their voices in speech classes. But deaf persons cannot automatically control the tone and volume of their voices like normally hearing people because they cannot hear themselves speak. Even with years of training, a deaf individual may have speech which is difficult, at first, for the listener to understand. Most people can understand "deaf speech" once they become accustomed to it. Some deaf persons are shy about speaking in public because of the negative reactions they have received before.*

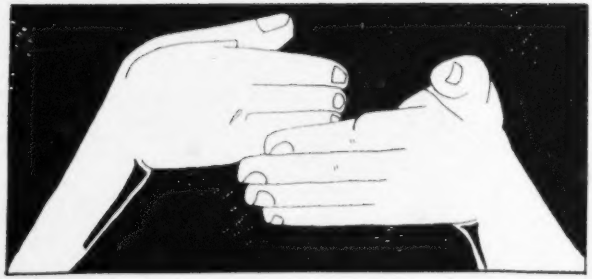
*"Deafness Briefs: Information on Deaf Adults," *Gallaudet College*, Washington, D.C. 20002

MYTH:

Deaf people aren't very bright because they have not learned to talk or use proper grammar.

FACT:

Because the basic form of communication of the deaf community is sign language, many deaf persons have not mastered the grammatical fine points of their "second" language — English. This certainly does not indicate a lack of intelligence. Most deaf individuals do learn English usage and do have speech training, but they may find it easier to communicate in their primary language.



MYTH:

All hearing-impaired persons can read lips.

FACT:

All of us, to some extent, rely on lip reading to understand our language. But even a practiced deaf listener can only understand 30-40% of spoken sounds by watching the lips of a speaker.* For example, words such as "bump" and "pump" look the same on the lips, but have totally different meanings. As with any other skill, the ability to read lips varies among individuals. Although the most accurate mode of communication with deaf persons is sign language, pencil and paper can sometimes be used as an alternative. Keep in mind that your body language and facial expressions say a lot, too.

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*"Deafness Briefs: Information on Deaf Adults," *Gallaudet College*, Washington, D.C. 20002

MYTH:

Hearing aids totally correct hearing impairments.

FACT:

Hearing aids are assistive devices which *improve* hearing in some individuals. The aids do not correct hearing. A hearing aid may enable a person to hear someone's voice, even though they may not be able to understand distinct words. The fact that someone is wearing a hearing aid does not necessarily indicate that the person can hear normally. A hearing aid merely lessens the degree of severity of a hearing loss.

MYTH:

Deaf people lead totally different lives than other people.

FACT:

Most deaf individuals living at home occupy their time just like you. They go to work, marry and raise families, drive cars, use the phone, go shopping and pay taxes. Of course, individual differences exist. But chances are good that when you meet a deaf person, you will share several similar interests which you can explore together.

MYTH:

Deaf persons cannot appreciate the arts because they can't hear music, movies, etc.

FACT:

Anyone who has ever had the privilege to see a performance by the National Theatre of the Deaf will realize the error in the above statement. Throughout history, deaf individuals have participated in and contributed to the performing arts. (How about Beethoven, for example?) Captioning of movies and other audio-visual media would be helpful for deaf citizens, and this practice should be encouraged. But as long as there is rhythm and visual image, those with residual hearing and even those who are totally deaf can be valued patrons and performers of the arts.

FIVE SCENES

Martha is approached by a person who knows she is deaf. The person hands her a note which says: "Can you read?" Martha writes back: "No."

Obviously, Martha's reply to the note indicates her ability to read. The stranger's action shows what is called "spread of effect": the belief that one sensory impairment affects all other functioning. The person assumes that because Martha is deaf she also cannot read. The out-dated phrase "deaf and dumb" implies much more than lack of oral speech — it compares deafness with lack of intelligence. Martha's reaction to the person's note certainly shows a sense of humor, but also reflects a distrust resulting from her many encounters with this attitudinal barrier. Martha could have been more helpful if she had shown a willingness to continue communication and had explained that her deafness had no effect on her ability to read.

Susie is very excited about her day at school. She is happily telling her father about it and is also using sign language to describe events. Her father angrily shouts, "Susie, quit using your hands! I can't understand your sign language and it's embarrassing when we're in public. Use only your voice!"

Deafness presents an obvious problem regarding communication. Many deaf persons use sign language when communicating with other deaf persons, friends and family members who have learned the language. It is unfortunate that only 2% of parents of deaf children take the time to learn their own child's language.* The reasons vary, and may include the idea that gestures are impolite or attract unwanted attention. In the above example, Susie's father rejects sign language as a legitimate form of communication, and indicates that this outward display of Susie's disability is embarrassing to him. To Susie, who has learned sign language as a "native tongue," using her hands allows her to best express herself intellectually and emotionally. Like other members of minority groups, Susie has learned English as a second language. But it is only natural that she feels more at ease with her first language. Sign language must be recognized as an acceptable way to communicate and not be shoved "into the closet" by parents who wish their deaf children to "pass" as hearing children. Deafness is certainly not shameful, and the use of sign language is not demeaning.

*Fred Schreiber, Executive Director, National Association of the Deaf.

Jack is seated on a plane and is very involved in the novel he is reading. The man next to him quietly asks Jack to move so that he can get out into the aisle. Jack continues reading his book. The man asks again in a loud and unfriendly tone. Jack remains silent. The man very angrily elbows Jack in the ribs. Jack looks up, surprised.

The passenger's impatience results from his belief that Jack is being intentionally uncooperative and rude. In fact, Jack does not hear the man's request that he move. It is important to remember that a lack of response to noise or speech, or an unusual response made in a situation, does not necessarily indicate rudeness. Sometimes an interpretation that unusual behavior equals belligerance can actually be dangerous for the deaf or hearing-impaired person. For example, a deaf person cannot hear a police officer's command to stop, or announcements and warnings which might be vital to his or her well-being. In this example, Jack simply does not hear the request of his fellow passenger whose action confused and hurt Jack. A solution might have been for the passenger to touch Jack's arm the second time he asked Jack to move. In this way, Jack would have looked up and could have seen that a request was being made.

Kevin is sitting at the bar in a local restaurant with a hearing friend who knows sign language. Kevin and his friend are having a discussion when the bartender comes up to take their drink orders. The bartender asks Kevin's friend, "What does he want?" The friend replies, "Why don't you ask him?"

Here, the attitudinal barrier involves the role of an interpreter or a friend acting as an interpreter. An interpreter does not think or answer for a deaf person, but simply translates the words of a deaf individual who is speaking, just as an interpreter for someone speaking Spanish translates that language for an English-speaking listener. The interpreter is a bridge. It is only polite to look at the person to whom you are talking, not at a third person; and it's rude to refer to a third person who is present as "he" instead of "you." If the bartender wanted to talk with Kevin, he should have looked at Kevin when speaking to him and should have carried on a conversation as if Kevin were hearing.

Heather is interviewing for a job in an advertising firm. Part of the job duties require talking with clients in person and by telephone. Although Heather is the best qualified applicant, the employer does not hire her. He cannot understand how she can effectively perform those public relations duties and present strong, positive cases for the firm without the ability to hear.

The employer shows two attitudinal barriers here; the first regarding job modifications, and the second dealing with language ability. The employer's decision not to hire Heather is based on her disability rather than on her ability. Many jobs which employers assume are impossible for deaf persons can be changed to suit a deaf employee. In this case, Heather could cooperate with another employee to do the telephone work and could have an interpreter with her during meetings with clients. It seems here that the employer believes that Heather's deafness interferes with her language skills so much that she could hurt business. As we've already said, deafness does not affect intelligence, creativity or the ability to think. The employer has made a damaging and false assumption which might have been corrected had he discussed these concerns with Heather. Most deaf job applicants would be happy to discuss job adaptations and any fears or hesitancy with their present or future employer.

WHEN YOU MEET A DEAF PERSON

1. Speak clearly and distinctly, but don't exaggerate. Use normal speed unless asked to slow down.
2. Provide a clear view of your mouth. Waving your hands or holding something in front of your lips, thus hiding them, makes lip reading impossible.
3. Use a normal tone unless you are asked to raise your voice. Shouting will be of no help.
4. Speak directly to the person, instead of from the side or back of the person.
5. Speak expressively. Because deaf persons cannot hear subtle changes in tone which may indicate sarcasm or seriousness, many will rely on your facial expressions, gestures and body movement to understand you.
6. If you are having trouble understanding a deaf person's speech, feel free to ask him to repeat. If that doesn't work, then use paper and a pen. Communicating is your goal. The method doesn't matter.
7. If you know any sign language, try using it. If the deaf person you are communicating with finds it a problem, the person will let you know. Usually your attempts will be appreciated and supported.
8. If a deaf person is with an interpreter, speak directly to the deaf person—not to the interpreter.
9. When talking with a deaf person, try not to stand in front of a light source (e.g., a window). The deaf person would find it hard to see your face, which would be silhouetted in the light.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

The deaf and the hearing person have a common problem of communication. The deaf person relies on eyes and hands for language; the hearing person, on ears. Both have something to say and something to listen to. You can help improve the communication between deaf and hearing citizens. Here are a few suggestions.

1. Ask your church, civic organization or club to make provisions for sign language interpreters. Announce that the service is available so that hearing impaired people can request it.
2. When children ask about sign language that they see on television or in public, tell them that it is the language of the deaf and that many people talk that way.
3. When you see television shows, newspaper articles or magazines that portray deaf citizens as competent and able, send a letter indicating your support to the producer or publisher.
4. Encourage high schools, colleges and universities to offer courses in sign language. Such courses could be accepted as a foreign language requirement.
5. Support sponsors of television shows that are captioned or have sign language interpreters. Tell commercial sponsors that you are expressing your approval of them by using their products.
6. When you read or view a presentation portraying deaf people in a negative way (sick, unintelligent), write a letter stating your opinion to the involved newspaper, magazine, or television station.
7. Install a teletypewriter phone system (TTY) in your office or place of business. Advertise its availability.
8. Invite deaf citizens to give lectures or presentations at meetings, conferences, and workshops. Some will use their own voices and others will bring sign language interpreters.
9. When planning a meeting, remember that visual aids are very helpful to the deaf participant. If a film is planned, provide a written script, outline or summary of the film content.
10. Encourage friends and family to learn sign language.

REFERENCES

The following is a brief list of materials which can improve your knowledge about deaf citizens.

Available from: Public Service Programs, Gallaudet College
Kendall Green
Washington, D.C. 20002

1. "Deafness Briefs: Information on Deaf Adults"
2. "American Sign Language: Fact and Fancy" by H. Markowicz
3. "A Look at American Sign Language"
4. "You and Your Deafness"
5. "What Every Person Should Know About Heredity and Deafness"
6. "A Look at Fingerspelling"

For additional information, contact:

The National Association of the Deaf
814 Thayer Ave.
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Phone: (301) 587-1788 (TTY and voice)

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Barrier Awareness Project
RRRI-ALLB, Suite 704
1828 L St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
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